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ABSTRACT

Students in speech classes at Northern Illinois University participated in tests to determine what assumption of roles in discussion groups impairs participation and prohibits consensus. Students were randomly assigned to one of twelve discussion groups of five members each. The topic and materials for discussion were excerpted from the local student newspaper and authenticated. Typical group behavior roles were assigned which would represent varied opinions. A nine-item semantic differential test was selected as the measurement of consensus. The resulting data demonstrated that there are no significant differences between means of scores on a test of consensus between groups with assigned roles and groups without assigned roles. In a group discussion where participants are labeled, the behavior is standardized, and it is more difficult to reach a consensus unless group members become accustomed to their roles. (DS)

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the effects of assigned role versus non-assigned role on group consensus

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by Philip A. Gray*

A number of authors have explored the function of roles in the discussion process,[1] and as a result, the identification and assigning of roles is an accepted training device. Few studies, however, have attempted to examine the relationship between the assumption of an assigned role and the effect that this act has upon the group or the decision reached. The specific purpose of this study is to determine whether or not the assumption of a role in a discussion group affects the discussants' perception of that group and inhibits the likelihood that consensus can be reached.

Procedure. The hypothesis of this study ($H_o = M_1 = M_2$) is that there are no significant differences between means of scores on a test of consensus between groups with assigned roles and groups without assigned roles.

The subjects chosen were all students enrolled in speech classes who had had some formal training in discussion methodology, and who, therefore, had a common background in group communication. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of twelve discussion groups of five members each.

The problem for discussion was chosen on the basis of 1) its current interest for students, 2) the likely perceived value of any discussion of the problem, and 3) the recency of the problem so that participants could feel that their discussion might still influence the outcome of the issue. The final problem selected was quoted directly from the local student newspaper and was footnoted for authenticity and to provide additional information.

In order to test for consensus in groups with assigned roles as opposed to consensus in groups with no assigned roles, it was necessary to select roles carefully. Roles were finally selected on the basis of 1) those most likely to be encountered in actual group behavior, and 2) those which would represent a mixture of points of view. The roles selected were those of *democratic leader, antagonist, yes-man, fact finder,* and *harmonizer.*[3] Role descriptions were duplicated and one of each was represented in each assigned role group. The five members of each non-role group received instructions to *be yourself.* No subject knew if his group were a role or non-role group.

The measurement of consensus was presented in the form of a nine item semantic differential test. Questions were asked on three areas of congeniality: getting along with group members, feeling of working together, and personal opinion as affected by the group. Subjects were directed to respond to each item by circling one of seven numbers ranging from a *none* to a *very much* perception.

Subjects were first oriented toward the idea that each was to play his assigned role to the best of his ability during the discussion. Each person, whether a member of a role or non-role group, received a sheet of instructions explaining the role assignment and a description of the problem. Groups were formed and the problem discussed. Upon reaching agreement (time was limited to 50 minutes) each group member was given the test and was asked to identify the role that he had played. Each group was assigned an identification number which was noted on the test.

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Results. The responses to the test items were assigned a numerical value ranging from 1 to 7 with 1 representing a *none* perception and 7 representing a *very much* perception. All responses valued 5 or greater were included in the high consensus category and all responses valued 3 or less were included in the low consensus category. Differences between categories and the role and non-role groupings were analyzed by use of the chi square.

Results of the analysis of total responses (see Table 1) suggest that the hypothesis could be rejected.

TABLE 1

Chi Square Analysis of Total Responses

	High	Low	Row Total	
Role	f 133 F 160	f 60 F 33	193	$x^2 = 49.6$ x^2 required at .01 level = 6.64
Non-role	f 211 F 184	f 11 F 38	222	
Column Total	344	71	N=415	

Analysis of the three categorial divisions of consensus are illustrated in Tables 2, 3, and 4. Table 2 illustrates the differences found between role and non-role groupings with respect to attitudes toward group members. Attitudes toward the group itself are examined in Table 3, and Table 4 illustrates the differences between the two groupings with respect to attitudes toward the decision reached. All findings were significant at the .01 level.

TABLE 2

Chi Square Analysis of Opinions Toward Persons

	High	Low	Row Total	
Role	f 45 F 56	f 20 F 9	65	$x^2 = 26.4$
Non-role	f 87 F 76	f 2 F 13	89	
Column Total	132	22	N=154	

TABLE 3

Chi Square Analysis of Opinions Toward Group

	High	Low	Row Total	
Role	f 42 F 47	f 12 F 7	54	$x^2 = 17.8$
Non-role	f 52 F 47	f 2 F 7	54	
Column Total	94	14	N=108	

TABLE 4

Chi Square Analysis of Opinions Toward Decision

	High	Low	Row Total	
Role	f 46 F 57	f 28 F 17	74	$x^2 = 8.2$
Non-role	f 72 F 61	f 7 F 18	79	
Column Total	118	35	N=153	

Discussion. This study tested the hypothesis that there are no significant differences in scores on a test of consensus between groups with assigned roles and groups without assigned roles. The results indicated that the hypothesis could be rejected. It is highly possible that groups without assigned roles reach greater consensus (as defined) than do groups with assigned roles. The greatest differences occurred in attitudes toward persons in the group. Possibly as a consequence of playing their roles well, group members were less able to interact as positively than were group members who "played themselves." Attitudes toward the group also showed a loading toward the low opinion end of the scale in the case of the assigned role groupings. The smallest difference found occurred in the responses toward the decision reached although the results were still significantly different between the two groupings.

This study suggests that in those circumstances where a group participant becomes labeled (and standardizes his behavior) the group will find it more difficult to achieve

consensus. A second implication is that, although it cannot be inferred that students should not be assigned roles in discussion, it can be inferred that time should be allowed for acclimation to the new roles of the group members.

*The research reported in this study was assisted by Susan Baker, Kenneth Doubler, Barbara Kreger, Mariann Serbin, and Robert Wilson under the direction of Dr. Philip A. Gray at Northern Illinois University.

[1]See, for example,

E.F. Borgatta, "Analysis of Social Interaction Actual, Role-Playing and Projective," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1955, 51, pp. 394-405.

J.C. Brown, "An Experiment in Role-Taking," *American Sociological Review*, 1952, 17, 587-597.

L.R. Hoffman, "Homogeneity of Member Personality and Its Effect on Group Problem Solving," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1959, 58, pp. 27-32.

E.E. Smith, "The Effects of Clear and Unclear Role Expectations on Group Productivity and Defensiveness," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1957, 55, pp. 213-217.

[2] See R. Victor Harnack and Thorrel B. Fest, *Group Discussion* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964) pp. 301-303, and

E. Jacobson, W.W. Charters, and S. Lieberman, "The Use of the Role Concept in the Study of Complex Organization," *Journal of Social Issues*, 1951, 7, pp. 18-27.

PROFILE OF PHILIP A. GRAY

Philip A. Gray is Assistant Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Assistant Professor of Speech at Northern Illinois University. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree with a comprehensive major in English, speech, and theater from Ohio Northern University. His Master's degree in rhetoric and Ph.D. in communication were both completed at the Ohio State University.

Prior to his service at Northern Illinois, Dr. Gray taught in the Ohio State University, and was Director of the Ohio High School Speech League. His professional affiliations include the Speech Communication Association, Central States Speech Association, and the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association. His name appears in *American Men of Science.*

Dr. Gray has had extensive experience as a consultant including work with the Oak Electro/netics Corporation, Price Waterhouse Corporation, the Illinois Office of Public Instruction, and the Illinois Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. His most recent publication, co-authored by Dr. Charles U. Larson, is *A Course in Listening Efficiency*, a programmed listening course prepared for distribution by Oak Electro/netics Corporation. Recent research activities have focused on several variables in small group communications.